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ABSTRACT

A workshop was given to identify and point out the limitations of mechanical language laboratory drills, and to compare them to drills which have been classified as being meaningful or communicative. Mechanical drills do not require an understanding of the meaning of the sentence; there is not consideration of context; and there is no connection from one sentence-item to the other. Meaningful drills require that the student know the meaning of the key words in the sentences being drilled. In addition, communicative drills require the student to take part in communication, that is, to be involved in a meaningful exchange of information. Workshop participants identified mechanical drill types from examples provided them and then constructed meaningful and communicative drill types that focused on the same teaching point as the mechanical drill. For example, students could be presented with a diagram of a family tree and be required to base the answers on the diagram. A communicative drill might require factual answers to the questions it asks. Because the construction of meaningful and communicative drills is not easy, it is hoped that the examples provided here will challenge readers to find real-life situations and to create useful drills for them. (AMH)

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Preparing Meaningful and Communicative Exercises for the Language Lab

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An Anecdote

The following anecdote has been ascribed to a well-known institution of higher learning, located somewhere in the U.S. Midwest: The setting is a language laboratory, *circa* 1965. English-as-a-second-language students are diligently and faithfully responding to the recorded stimuli of an audio-lingual drill of the type ever so popular since the heyday of behaviourism and structural linguistics. The particular drill being practiced is based on the present perfect continuous tense and goes something like this... "Listen to the following examples of the drill you are going to practice today:

Example I.

Voice 1 (Teacher): How long have you been studying English? – for 2 months –

Voice 2 (Student): I've been studying English for 2 months.

(Voice 1 then repeats the correct answer.)

Example II.

Voice 1: How long have you been living in the dorm? – since September–

Voice 2: I've been living in the dorm since September.

(Voice 1 repeats answer.)"

The drill itself begins, and the stimuli vary, especially in the first part or the stem; apart from that, students regularly hear either

"for 2 months" or "since September." For example:

Master Tape Stimulus: "How long have you been taking chemistry? – for 2 months –

Student Response: I been taking chemistry for 2 months.

Master Tape Corrected Response: I've been taking chemistry for 2 months."

The attending lab monitor listens to the student's consistently correct responses with initial fascination and great satisfaction. However, after 25 minutes of monitoring the chanting students (who seem to have grown rather "overzealous" in their responses), the monitor (who happens to be a graduate student in the university's applied linguistics program) begins to have second thoughts. The lab period ends, and to test out a hypothesis, still forming in the back of his mind, our curious monitor stealthily follows the group of foreign students to a nearby bus stop where they are waiting for the campus bus to take them to their dorm. After a few minutes in the bushes, rehearsing his strategy, the monitor appears on the scene and walks up to the group. His question is directed at one student in particular: "How long have you been waiting for the bus?" he enquires. The student stares at him in bewilderment. He repeats the question, this time directing it at a student nearby. Both students then reply with a question word in their own language, "Qué...?" and one student adds, "I no understand." But the monitor persists, this time addressing two more students, but with similar results. Finally, returning to the first two, he asks the same question, "How long have you been waiting for the bus?" but this time he adds (almost automatically), "–for 2 months–." The students, smiling with relief, respond in unison, "I've been waiting for the bus for 2 months." (A sequel to the story has it that during the course of the little experiment, the bus came and went, leaving the students behind.)

Describing and Comparing Mechanical, Meaningful, & Communicative Drills

One may question the veracity of the preceeding anecdote, yet it is not difficult to imagine a similar real-life situation in which something equally as ridiculous (and unfortunate) could occur. The

story serves to point out certain limitations to audio-lingual drills of the "mechanical" type. The purpose of this workshop is not only to identify and point out the limitations of language laboratory drills of this type, but to compare them to drills which have been classified as being "meaningful" or "communicative" (Dakin, 1973 and Paulston & Bruder, 1975). In addition, our goal will be to actually construct drills of the latter two types for use in a language laboratory.

On paper, mechanical drills look like this:

In the blank to the right, write the present continuous form of the verb in parentheses.

Example: John (do) his homework now._____

1. John (watch) television now. _____
2. Mary (walk) home now. _____
3. The students (read) the story now. _____
4. I (study) my English lesson now. _____

(The language laboratory version of this drill would be recorded on tape, but would be similar in form, except that a corrected response would likely be provided after the student's response.)

Mechanical drills of this type ask the learner to manipulate a linguistic form (in this case the verb "to be" plus the -ing form of the main verb) without requiring an understanding of the meaning of the sentence. Furthermore, in this particular drill there is no consideration for context; there is no relation or connection from one sentence-item to the other.

A mechanical drill, or in the words of Dakin (1973), a "meaningless" drill, focuses on one or more discrete elements of language (linguistic forms) with no regard for meaning. As we have seen from the previous example, all the student needs to do in order to get the drill item correct is to "mechanically" supply a form. There is no way for us to know if the student actually knew what s/he was saying.

Critics (such as Oller, 1979) are unsparing in their judgements of mechanical (meaningless) drills:

> From meaning-less linguistic analysis comes meaningless pattern drill to instill the structural patterns or the distributional "meanings" of linguistic forms as they are strung together in utterances.... But nothing could be more enslaving and therefore less worthy of the human mind than to have it chained to the mechanics of the patterns of the language rather than free to dwell on the message conveyed through language (pp. 158-159).

Dakin (1973) is perhaps more realistic when he admits, in a roundabout way, that meaningless drills "may" be responsible for some form of learning:

> Even if a learner appears to be learning a lot from (meaningless) drills, this does not prove that it is the drills that are doing the work. The pupils may be learning *despite*, not because of, the drills. ... Other techniques of practice must be tried to see if they achieve equally good or better results. Exercises and problems are available as additional or alternative materials, and there is no reason why drills should continue to be meaningless... (p. 60).

It is useful to be aware of current professional opinion regarding different types of drills, but it is not the intent of this workshop to ultimately prove or disprove the usefulness (on some level or other) of mechanical drills. Instead the intention here is to search for alternatives and to apply them to the language laboratory.

The alternatives, *meaningful and communicative drill* types, can be described as follows:

Meaningful drills require more than just the repetition or manipulation of a linguistic form. In providing a correct response, the student must know the meaning of key words in the stucture being drilled. Dakin (p. 64) provides an example using a picture stimulus such as , whereby after being given several similar road-sign examples with correct responses, the student is expected to respond: "You can't turn right here."

Another example from Dakin (p. 71) pinpoints the need for lexical knowledge in a meaningful drill. *Student hears (Stimulus):* "Father walked here." *Expected Response:* "He came by foot." (S): "Mother flew here." (R): "She came by plane."

Communicative drills go one step further in that they require the student to actually take part in a discourse or communication

that is, be involved in a meaningful exchange of information. A communicative drill is likely to be more realistic that a meaningful one in that the student is sending and/or receiving a real message. Paulston and Bruder (1975) describe communicative drills as ones having little or no control of the lexical items involved, some control of patterns, but not necessarily one correct or anticipated answer. One example of a communicative drill is a question/answer dialog between teacher and student, as shown in the following example: Teacher (Stimulus): "How did you get to class this morning, Johnny?" Student (a correct response): "By car." (Note that a response such as, "She gets here by car" or "You arrive by car" shows that the student can respond meaningfully (to some of the vocabulary in the stimulus), but not communicatively. Also note that drills are communicative only if the information provided the questioner is new (or "news") to him or her. For example, a teacher who asks one of his/her students, "Are you a student?" is not involved in a communicative drill or dialogue.

Constructing Meaningful and Communicative Drill Types

The first actual task for workshop participants was to identify the following three mechanical drill types as such and then to construct meaningful and/or communicative drill items for each, focusing on the same language teaching point as indicated in the original mechanical item.

Workshop Task: Identifying and Reconstructing Drill Types

Instructions: Identify each of the following drill items as a) mechanical, b) meaningful, or c) communicative. Then, if possible, reconstruct each drill in the other two ways – for example, type a) as b) and c).

Item No. 1: Change each of the following sentences from the simple present tense to the continuous present tense. Substitute the word "now" for the underlined time word(s).

–Example–

Simple Present: I **sometimes** brush my teeth.
Continuous Present: *I am brushing my teeth now.*

Simple Present: He eats breakfast **every morning.**
Continuous Present: *He is eating breakfast now.*

Drill Type: MECHANICAL

Item No. 2: Change the following sentences to negative questions.

–Example–
Someone brought a leopard to school.
Didn't anyone bring a leopard to school?
We took some pictures at the party.
Didn't we (you) take any pictures at the party?

Drill Type: MECHANICAL

Item No. 3: Listen to and repeat the following minimal sound pairs:
ship sheep bite beat took book

Drill Type: MECHANICAL

For each of the previous three items, workshop participants constructed the following drills:

For No. 1 – Language Teaching Point: Change from the simple present to the present continuous tense.

Meaningful Drill Item –

Have students complete a sentence by speaking their responses during the pause which follows the stimulus.

–Example–
Stimulus: I sometimes walk to school, but this morning (pause)
Response: I'm taking the bus.
(It was suggested that in the next phase of the drill a sample correct response, such as the one above, be provided on the tape.)

Note: Students would be told that responses of simple negation such as "..I'm not." would not be accepted for this drill.

Stimulus: I often work on weekends, but this weekend
Response: (pause)
Sample Correct Response: ... I'm just taking it easy.

For No. 2 – Language Teaching Point: Change affirmative statements to negative questions.

Meaningful Drill Item –

Have students identify statements which are false by changing them to negatives.

–Examples–
Stimulus: In the U.S.A. it usually snows in the summer.
Response: –False– In the U.S.A. it usually doesn't snow in the summer.
Stimulus: Most babies drink milk.
No Response (true).

Stimulus: A turtle runs as fast as a rabbit.
Response: A turtle doesn't run as fast as a rabbit.

For No. 3 – Language Teaching Point: Producing phonemic differences vis-a-vis minimal word pairs

Meaningful Drill Item –

Have students complete sentences in a meaningful way so as to include the minimal word pairs provided for them (on paper).

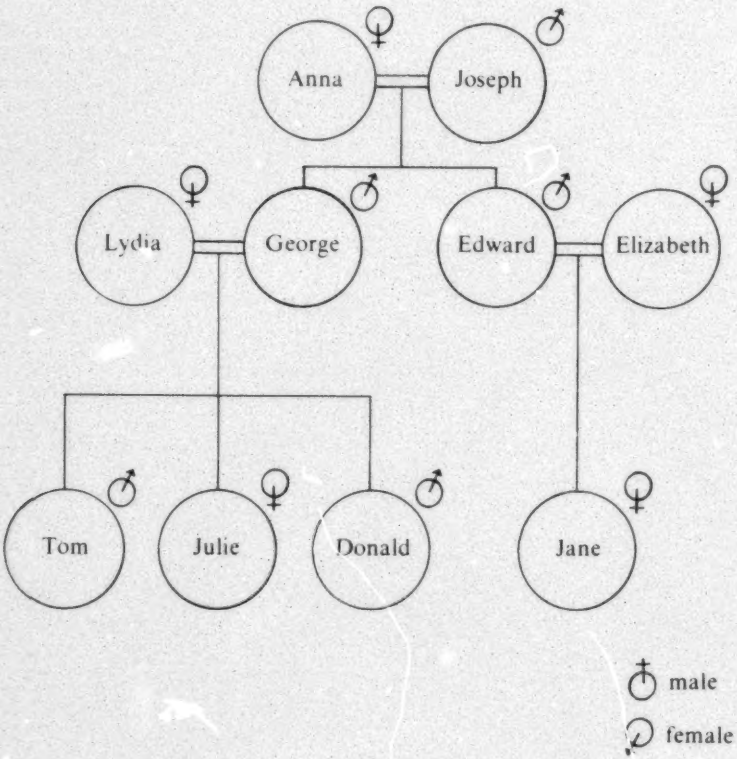
–Example–

Stimulus: ship/sheep –	Farmer Jones has a _____, not a _____
Response:	Farmer Jones has a sheep, not a ship.
Stimulus: bite/beat –	Vicious dogs _____ people, not _____ them.
Stimulus: took/book –	Who _____ my _____?

The final part of the workshop consisted of a presentation and discussion of examples of meaningful and communicative drills which can be used effectively in a language laboratory. These examples were prepared prior to the workshop itself and are acknowledged in the respective footnotes.

Sample Meaningful Drill*

Instructions: The following diagram of family relationships can be projected on a screen from an overhead projector or copies can be distributed to individual students at their lab stations. Students should be told to carefully study the diagram and to ask any questions they have about it. It is assumed, of course, that students would have previously learned about family relationships in class.



* This sample is taken from a final examination project, designed by Ms. Lise Gregoire for the TESL 415 course at Concordia University.

The following is a transcription of the actual tape. If students find the drill too difficult at the outset, it may be useful to provide them with the transcription so that they can read along as they listen.

Look at the family tree you have in front of you. You will hear five sentences. These sentences are incomplete. Complete each sentence by saying the word which correctly describes the family relationship. Since each sentence will be said twice, wait until you have heard it for the second time before giving your answer.

Example: Lydia is Edward's _____. I repeat.
Lydia is Edward's *sister-in-law*. In the pause you have heard "sister-in-law" because this is the word used to describe how Lydia is related to Edward.

Now begin. (Each sentence will be spoken twice.)

1. Lydia is George's _____.
2. Elizabeth is Julie's _____.
3. Elizabeth is Joseph's _____.
4. Donald is Edward's _____.
5. Tom is Anna's _____.

End of tape.

Remarks:

– It was pointed out that this exercise is an example of a meaningful drill which allows for self-correction – i.e., there is only one possible correct response, and it is recorded on the tape.

– Participants provided some useful comments on how to improve the exercise. One observation was that it could be made more human or life-like by substituting pictures of the persons (or at least of their faces) for the circles on the diagram.

– Another excellent suggestion was to turn the drill into a dialogue by changing the stimuli to questions such as:

"1. How is Lydia related to George?" This would encourage students to answer in statements – i.e., "She's George's wife." – instead of one-word responses. By creating a dialogue, the drill comes close to being communicative. (In fact, note that if the information provided

by the student were not previously known by the questioner, the drill would be communicative.)

– One purpose of providing this sample meaningful drill is to encourage the creation of other, similar drills. For example, city maps could be used in a similar format, wherein students would be asked to supply (speak) directions on how to get from one designated point to another.

Sample Communicative Drill*

Instructions: Before using this drill in the lab, a similar form of it should be practised in class, using realia and actual situations occuring in the classroom. What follows is the transcription of the lab drill. In this case, students would not be given copies to refer to during the drill.

Listen to the following questions and answer them accurately in terms of the situation you are in right now. For example, you will hear... "I can't see you very well out there. ... Do you have your book with you?

You might respond... "No, I don't. -or- Yes, I do."

Now you try it. Ready?

Part I –

(Stimulus:) I can't see you very well out there in that vast language lab. ...
1. Are you standing up?

(Response:) _____

(Model Response:) No, I'm not

(S): 2. Are you ready to practice?

(R): _____

(MR): Yes, I am.

* This sample was prepared by the author and Roger Kenner of the Language Laboratory Department at Concordia University.

(S): 3. Do you have your headphones on?

(R): _____

(MR): Yes, I do. _____

(S): 4. Please look at your tape. Is it moving forward?

(R): _____

(MR): Yes, it is. _____

(S): 5. Tell me... Is there a student in the booth to your left?

(R): _____

(MR): Yes, there is. _____

Very good! Now I'm getting the picture. Hmmmm... But I need a little more information. Answer the following questions about yourself.

Here's an example. ... "What kind of lab are you in right now?"
"I'm in a language lab."

Ready?

(S): 1. How do you like this drill?

(R): _____

(MR): I like it very much. _____

(S): 2. Oh ... by the way, who's sitting in the booth in front of you?

(R): _____

(MR): That's Mr. X. _____

(S): 3. ...And to your right?

(R): _____

(MR): That's Mrs. Y. _____

(S): 4. What time is it right now?

(R): _____

(MR): It's eight-fifteen.

(S): 5. What time do we get out of here?

(R): _____

(MR): At eight-thirty, I think.

End of tape.

Remarks:

– As with the meaningful drill previously described, participants pointed out that in some instances this exercise is "correctable" in the playback phase. This is especially true if the drill is given "live" by the teacher or monitor from the lab console. For example, responses to Part II, question No. 2 – "Oh... by the way, who's sitting in the booth in front of you?" can be anticipated from a seating chart and corrected accordingly.

– It was also noted that for communicative purposes, the model responses would not be supplied on the tape since the correctness of responses for most items can only be determined by having the monitor or teacher do a "live" check of the actual situation.

Conclusion

Participants agreed that mechanical drills probably do not contribute to realistic or active language performance and may actually do the student more harm than good in achieving this goal. However, it was also agreed that the construction of meaningful and communicative drills for a programmed, language lab situation is not an easy task (when compared to the simplicity of constructing mechanical drills). This is true because as one moves on the continuum from mechanical to "less mechanical," the discreteness or reliability of "only one possible correct answer" may disappear.

From the few, but good, examples of meaningful and communicative drill items which were presented in this workshop, it is my hope that the participants will be challenged and inspired to find other real-life situations and to create useful drills for them, both for the classroom and the language laboratory.

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Gerry Strei has played an active role in language laboratory concerns ever since his days as a lab administrator and teacher for the U.S. Binational Center in Bogota, Colombia. Since then he has been involved in language teaching, learning, and administration, both within and without the language lab, including several years with Concordia University's language departments and labs. He has written articles about language laboratory pedagogy for the *English Teaching Forum* and the *NALLD Journal*. He is currently Director of Intensive English Programs at Nova University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.